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ABSTRACT

Writing laboratories in colleges across the United States have encountered problems when offering individualized instruction: too often the students work in isolation with materials that are inadequate or inappropriate. This paper suggests, as a remedy to this situation that tutors be made available to the students whenever the writing lab is open and that the teachers/tutors themselves develop the writing lab's resource materials instead of using outside, or commerical, materials. An inservice workshop that prepares the teachers as tutors is described, emphasizing that tutors should "teach to the concept and not to the error." Six transparencies used in the workshop show teachers that developing instructional materials is a process similar to actually learning the material's underlying concepts. (RL)

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# Alternatives to Automated Learning

In the wake of the recent furor over the "literacy crisis" (as it has come to be known), the number of writing labs has dramatically increased in colleges across the country. Once found only in community colleges, writing centers are now an accepted part of four-year colleges and universities as well. Even the more prestigious universities have recognized the need for some type of program to aid students with their writing.

This proliferation of writing centers has brought about a corresponding proliferation of materials to be used in these centers. Like the writing centers themselves, the material designed for use in them varies widely in content, style, and quality. Some of the material is, of course, very helpful and effective. Unfortunately, however, most of it is not. Designed primarily to be used by students working on their own, much of the material that is available commercially is typically gimmicky, confusing, and downright inaccurate.

Now that writing labs have won their battle for acceptance and material for these labs is available in abundance, it is time for us to examine more critically the quality of these labs and the material designed for use in them. Most of the labs are primarily centers for self-paced, individualized instruction, concepts that are valid enough in theory. In practice, however, only in the worst sense of these terms is the theory implemented. Students are indeed working individually and at their own rate. But all too often, "individually" is interpreted as "without a tutor." And the material that the student plows through (albeit at his own rate) is neither appropriate to his particular needs nor, in many cases, pertinent to his writing problems. The various mechanized material and programmed texts that

CS204075

are available commercially tend to range from the insultingly elementary and asinine to the unimaginatively complex and repetitious.

While a writing center can rise above its material, these materials certainly constitute an important element in any program. This element becomes even more crucial if the writing lab does not stress the role of the tutor but depends heavily on materials for instruction. There are at least two ways in which writing centers can avoid the problems that arise when too much reliance is placed on inadequate or inappropriate materials. In the first place, tutoring can replace or at least supplement the material that is used. Obviously, tutors are expensive, and the ideal of each student working one-to-one with a tutor can seldom be realized. It is not unrealistic, however, to expect each student to have some contact with a tutor. Whether these tutors are salaried professionals, graduate students, or undergraduates (in the style of Ken Bruffee's peer tutoring at Brooklyn College), it is essential that students have some type of tutorial instruction, especially at critical junctures when concepts must be mastered.

In a lab such as ours, where students from all disciplines with a wide range of abilities and interests are seen on a voluntary and referral basis, it is especially important to have tutors available initially to talk with the student and outline a course of study that will meet his particular needs. In the case of graduate students writing dissertations or resumés, continued tutoring sessions are frequently indicated. On the other hand, undergraduate students who are having problems with sentence structure or spelling can sometimes work on their own after the first diagnostic session with only brief tutorial contact as new concepts are encountered.

A second way in which the problem of inadequate and inappropriate material can be alleviated is for the staff of writing labs to develop their own material. Self-developed material has several advantages over the commercial products. In

the first place, it is considerably less expensive. Several tutors can be hired each year with the money that is budgeted for expensive new materials. Second, material (primarily handouts) developed by the tutors in a lab can be designed to meet the specific needs of the students that come to the lab. More importantly, these handouts can be modified and revised by the tutors as they are used. And finally, tutors are more comfortable and knowledgeable with material they have themselves developed.

In a questionnaire which we gave our students last spring, we asked that they rank in order of preference the different types of instruction offered in our writing center. Not surprisingly, tutoring sessions were ranked first, but in second place--ahead of cassette tapes, programmed texts, workbooks, etc.--were the handouts we had developed ourselves. With this confirmation of our own inclinations, we set out this year to systematically develop more material for our center.

We began by having a three-day workshop to orient the staff to the process of developing materials for a diverse audience. During the first day of the workshop, the tutors became familiar with the materials that were already available in the center. In addition, we discussed with them the general philosophy of our program as well as specific methods of teaching mechanics, grammar, and rhetoric. The second day several faculty members from different departments came to the workshop to talk about the types of writing problems that they had encountered with their students. On the final day, the tutors were instructed in the development of materials and asked to choose an area in which they would like to work.

Regardless of the area of instruction that the tutors chose, they were encouraged to teach to the concept rather than to the error. Instruction

that is error oriented fails to give the student the information needed to avoid the error. By first emphasizing the concept to be mastered, a handout provides the context essential to the understanding of the error. The tutors were also reminded that they were working with adults and, therefore, should keep this audience in mind. We recommended that they use the least amount of grammatical jargon possible in their handouts. But, where such terminology was essential, the traditional terms found in student handbooks should be used. We advised the tutors to include as many concrete rules as possible in explaining the concept and to avoid exceptions where possible. Since students learn in various ways, the tutors were encouraged to incorporate in their handouts any visual examples or diagrams that might be helpful to the student.

In order to demonstrate to the tutors that the process of developing instructional material is similar to that of learning the same material, we devised a group activity which took the staff step-by-step through the development of a handout on the compound sentence. We began by establishing the least a student should know in order to understand a compound sentence. After narrowing many suggestions, we decided that a student would have to know what a subject and a verb are and that a simple sentence has only one subject-verb relationship. Using these basic concepts and terms, we worked on a definition of the compound sentence, arriving finally at the following statement:

Transparency I

We diagramed the concept visually in this way:

Transparency II

The next step was to establish how the student should use the concept in his writing. In the case of the compound sentence, the student needs to understand

the structure of the sentence in order to punctuate it correctly. As Mina Shaughnessey points out in her valuable study of basic writing, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977, p. 29), "punctuation ought not to begin with the marks themselves but with the structures that elicit these marks." The staff then decided that rules and examples should be given when short independent clauses are joined.

Transparency III

Once the concept and its application had been established, the tutors made up ten pairs of sentences which would be more appropriately written as compound sentences. Students were then asked to combine each pair of sentences into one compound sentence using either a coordinating conjunction, conjunctive adverb, or a semicolon.

Transparency IV

Because we believe strongly that the most effective exercises are those that require students to compose their own sentences, another exercise was devised which asked the students to write their own compound sentences.

Transparency V

Finally, we dealt with the problems that result from incorrectly punctuated compound sentences. A third exercise was designed in which students were asked to analyze the construction of sentences that had been incorrectly punctuated (run-on and comma-splice errors), to separate these into two complete sentences, and finally to rejoin them, this time correctly.

Transparency VI

By the end of the workshop, each tutor had decided on some aspect of composition on which to develop a handout. The tutors were encouraged to try various techniques with students in the developing process and to ask questions

of other tutors or faculty members. At the first staff meeting, which occurred at the end of one month, the tutors explained their prepared materials to each other, carefully going through their thought processes.

By operating primarily as a tutorial lab and by involving our tutors in the development of material for the lab, we are attempting to avoid the problems of mechanization, depersonalization, and inappropriate instruction that characterize many large writing centers. Seeing ourselves as a supplement to classroom instruction and a resource for both students and faculty, we strive to maintain the same level of professionalism that is found in the classroom. The material that we offer students for instruction is a straight-forward, clear presentation of concepts that they need to master in order to function effectively in their chosen area. The tutoring we give them is of the same quality. While we make every effort to be pleasant and helpful to the students, we also treat them as responsible adults who are motivated to learn rather than as children who must be enticed by clever, TV-like material or as automatons who can be plugged into a machine or a programmed text. If writing centers are to become a viable, permanent part of university life, academics rather than gimmicks must be our concern.

Reading time: Approximately 15-17 minutes.

SUPPLEMENT: Transparencies

Transparency I

A. What is a compound sentence?

A compound sentence is a combination of two or more independent clauses. An independent clause is the same as a simple sentence. It has a subject and a predicate, and it expresses a complete thought. Therefore, a compound sentence is really made up of two or more simple sentences. These simple sentences, however, must be related in thought. If they are not related, the resulting sentence will be ridiculous. (For example--My dog is a spaniel, and it rained yesterday.)

The independent clauses in a compound sentence are equal in rank. Each has subject-verb relationship, and each could stand alone as a simple sentence.

Transparency II

Transparency III

B. How is a compound sentence correctly punctuated?

There are three ways to connect the independent clause of a compound sentence:

1. Use a comma and a coordinating conjunction (and, or, nor, but, for, yet, so).
   Ex.--Today was his birthday, and he was determined to have a good time.
2. Use a semicolon
   Ex.--Yesterday is best forgotten; tomorrow may never come.
3. Use a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb (however, moreover, nevertheless, therefore, consequently, of course, in fact, indeed, etc.)
   Ex.--We walked quickly and rested seldom; therefore, we arrived before nightfall.

NOTE: The conjunctive adverb is followed by a comma!

Transparency IV

Exercise

Combine the following pairs of simple sentences into compound sentences. Carefully punctuate each sentence.

1. The day was warm. The sky was cloudy.
2. Jim doesn't like to dance. He enjoys singing.
3. The teacher was busy. The students were told to be quiet.
4. The car swerved dangerously. No one was injured.
5. The sisters looked alike. They were not twins.
6. Sue is a very popular girl at school. She is not very well liked in her hometown.
7. We had planned a picnic. The weather didn't cooperate.
8. My English class didn't meet today. My history class was dismissed for a Forum Arts program.
9. The rain fell steadily all day. By evening the water had risen dangerously.
10. Mary chose to live alone. She was often lonely.

Transparency V

Exercise

Write the following types of compound sentences. Be sure to punctuate each sentence correctly.

1. Three compound sentences using a comma and a coordinating conjunction.
2. Three compound sentences using just a conjunction.
3. Three compound sentences using a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb. (Remember to place a comma after the conjunctive adverb).

Transparency VI

C. What is the result of an incorrectly punctuated compound sentence?

A compound sentence that is not punctuated correctly results in a comma-splice error or a run-on sentence.
Example:

Jane liked to dance it was her favorite pastime. (run-on)

The boy threw his hat on the floor, then he stomped on it (comma-splice)

The examples above are compound sentences, but they are not punctuated correctly. First write each of them as two separate simple sentences. Next write them as correctly punctuated compound sentences. Add a coordinating conjunction or a conjunctive adverb if it is needed.